



# RACE AND NATIONALITIES:THE ETHNIC CLASSIFICATION PROJECTWITHIN IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES

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**RACE AND NATIONALITIES:  
THE ETHNIC CLASSIFICATION PROJECT  
WITHIN IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

From the first full-scale census in the early 1950s to the present day, the question of ethnic minorities has featured high on the PRC political agenda. The official discourse on minorities and the representation of minorities are particularly interesting to understand how the classification of the Chinese population into a majority Han and numerous minorities has been undertaken to fit to the dominant ideology.

I will attempt to explain, through representation of minorities, the dominant ideology and the political strategies on a nation-level implied in the ethnic classification. I will argue that the representation of minorities and the treatment of ethnicity question in this period hint a wider strategy that attempts to create a Han national identity and to define a new model of a universal China. Therefore, the study of minorities’ representation at the first stage of the classification may highlight the origin of political pattern of “diversity in unity” described in the 1990s by Fei Xiaotong.

## PAPER

From the first full-scale census in the early 1950s to the present day, the question of ethnic minorities has featured high on the People's Republic of China (PRC) political agenda.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic groups come into play as new material for conveying the political ideology of the Party, and setting up a new subject in its propaganda. Behind very simple images of ethnic communities through minorities in posters or magazines a complex discourse on the search for Chinese national identity and on the need for political legitimization take shape in the young PRC. I distinguish three periods in the question of ethnicity in China since the foundation of the PRC: a first period from 1949 to the end of the 1970s, while ethnic identification is still in process and Han majority sovereignty is being established; from the early 1980s to the middle of the 1990s, in the heart of the economic reform era, when "ethnic" conflicts start to appear repeatedly in the Chinese newspapers while each is encouraged to grow rich; from the end of the 1990s on, the minorities have managed to impose themselves as part of the (local) economic life, even though still ruled by Han supremacy. The period this essay will deal with is the one I identified as the first period.

I argue that any classification of population into ethnicities is an answer to a political and ideological purpose to justify inequalities and the hegemony of a dominant group. As Nicholas B. Dirks shows brilliantly in his work on Indian castes, systematic classification of population into distinct groups is

“[...] not some unchanged survival of ancient India, not some single system that reflects a core civilizational value, not a basic expression of India tradition.”<sup>2</sup>

In short, divisions are the facts of construction. They are neither fundamental nor specific, they are only valorised (or despised in some case) for one peculiar reason or another. Indeed, the Ethnic Classification Project teams consisted of some scientists and mainly of official local and national leaders. Ethnologists and anthropologists were trained in Western schools or with Western methods: we know that those disciplines in

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<sup>1</sup> See Fei Xiaotong's works on ethnicity, and especially the concept of « diversity in unity » developed in Fei Xiaotong, *Zhonghua minzu duo yuan yi ti geju (Pattern of diversity in unity of the Chinese nation)*, Beijing, Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind, Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

Western were largely influenced by colonialism and colonial thoughts (and vice versa). National and local leaders were also involved in this project, sometimes even more than scientists, to make sure that the project would be accomplished according to the national policies. The purpose of this short presentation would be to analyse the official discourse on ethnicity in early PRC. We will argue that representations of ethnic minorities imply a wider ideological discourse in keeping with the general pattern of the government's policy.

Chinese propaganda posters are an inexhaustible mine of information to tackle the historic events in China over the last 50 years.<sup>3</sup> They also provide a body of material that tells us more about ideals and perspectives ("what this or this should be") than about concrete facts ("what this or this is"). Art in all its forms, under the influence of Mao's famous Yan'an speech on literature and art in 1942, is clearly expected to support and illustrate the official ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP or *gongchandang* 共产党).<sup>4</sup> In the event, this approach was particularly used- and effective because widely spread- in propaganda posters, till they lost their appeal and credibility in the era of reforms. Visibly, propaganda posters accompanied every historic and political change in the first period of the PRC, and the Ethnic Classification

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<sup>3</sup> Several books on Chinese propaganda posters and «New Year» posters (*nianhua*) have been published. Pictures often occur with comments by the authors, historians or sinologists. Stefan Landsberger's collection is one of the most complete reference. See his book: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*. Amsterdam; Singapore: The Pepin Press, 1995; and his website: "Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages." <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/> (checked in April 2006).

See also: Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999; Claude Gorsky, *La Chine à l'affiche*, Paris, Ramsay, 1997; Victoria and James Edison, *Cultural Revolution : Posters & Memorabilia*, Atglen, Shiffer Pub, 2005; *Catalogue of Vintage Chinese Posters c. 1939-1990 : Sale 583*, London, Bloomsbery Auctions, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Mao's Talks of the Yan'an forum on Literature and Arts in May 1942 begins with the following sentence:

我们今天开会，就是要使文艺很好地成为整个革命机器的一个组成部分，作为团结人民、教育人民、打击敌人、消灭敌人的有力的武器，帮助人民同心同德地和敌人作斗争。

The purpose of our meeting today is to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and mind.

These words clearly made literature and art part of the CCP's propaganda organ to establish its legitimacy and authority.

Project is one of the most important breaks with the Republican period that preceded the Communist era.

Representations of ethnic minorities on propaganda posters enable us to witness the political strategies implied in the construction of a new Chinese nation-state. The division of the population and the identification of several minorities was not intended merely to recognize a multiethnic reality nor to reward non-Han participation in the struggle against the Guomindang, but mainly to pave the way for a new Chinese national identity that needed to be legitimated and redefined by the whole population. The Ethnic Classification Project was 30-year long project undertaken at the same time as the first representations of minorities appeared in propaganda media.

Hence, I will attempt in this essay to analyse and deconstruct the discourse of the CCP on ethnicity through the representation of playful and colourful minorities. The ethnic division/ di-vision, I argue, seek a justification for Han supremacy; it attempts to dictate a new social order through a strict classification; it legitimates the new Chinese national identity propounded by the PRC government.<sup>5</sup>

### **Ethnic minorities on posters: objectification and ideology**

I argue that representations of minorities imply a justification of the communist state among the China's peoples. Posters were mostly made by Han artists for a Han public, as a product of the CCP ideology. The minorities on posters are never represented for themselves: they are never the main theme of the discourse; they only support the discourse, like scenery.

On this poster (see below), the main characters are Mongol children, sitting on the grass and concentrating on a radio. The most obvious remark to be made is that Mongol children are not the main theme of the poster. The composition of the poster clearly aims to focus the spectator's attention on the radio set. The central position of a white radio, the children's happy facial expressions with eyes and ears turned toward the radio (even the small white lamb on the right seems to look at the radio), the way

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<sup>5</sup> « Di-vision » is to describe here the ambivalence of the ethnic identification and classification: this is both about dividing population into groups, and producing a new way of visualizing and imagining Chinese nation.

the child holds the radio at arm's length, every detail tell us about the outstanding importance of the radio as object.



Plate 1: 草原联北京

*The Grassland is Connected to Beijing*, author unknown, 1977

Besides, the minority children are passively listening to the radio: they are receiving in a captive posture. At the same time, the radio is broadcasting, as we surmise from the inclined head of the little girl on the left: the radio, despite an inanimate object, is expansive, actively transmitting something to lively but inactive minorities. Ethnic minorities are then objectified as lifeless items, while the inanimate item is personified.

From then on, minorities are not represented for themselves but to represent (and therefore to identify and to acknowledge) the Chinese state. The radio set represents modernity and technology, which the Chinese state tries to promote. This poster shows that anyone, *even* minorities living far away from the capital Beijing may have access to modernity and high technology.

Posters are almost systematically coupled with texts that point to the real subject of the picture. Verbal texts are of some importance too, since they give a second reading of the picture. For this poster in particular, the caption confirms our analysis: the radio is broadcasting from Beijing, that is to say an official programme from the government. The written texts also assert that posters need a supplementary reading: more than showing a simple image, there is something said that is meant to be understood by every one. Moreover, we can even argue for a third reading, one hidden behind image and text: the sub-text, the ideological message. Connected to Beijing,

minorities are therefore under Beijing's control and are destined to follow the government's political line. In short, minorities hold the official ideology.

Peculiarly absent for all their presence, the image of minorities on posters is adapted to fit the official ideology. While constructing an inanimate minority and implying an active presence of the state (sometimes through modernity, sometimes through the Han majority as we will see below), these posters are made by Han artists for a Han public: they are the product of CCP ideology.

### ***Divide et Impera: Han's Supremacy***

The Ethnic Classification Project directed by scientists (sociologists, ethnologists... mostly trained in Western schools) and mainly CCP local and national leaders, constructed homogeneous and mutually exclusive "ethnic" communities. The communist government applied the "divide et impera" (divide and rule) strategy: in creating one majority and a myriad of small minorities groups, the CCP asserted the supremacy of the majority Han.<sup>6</sup> In some ways, colonialist theory may help us to understand the relationship that binds minorities and Han to each other: the minority was an effect of the majority and also the means for its consolidation as a majority.<sup>7</sup> It is significant that disciplines like sociology, anthropology or ethnology which tend to identify and classify the population into separate groups, were born in Europe when colonialism reached its high point.

The PRC state largely employed discourse of protection of minorities to justify the constant need of minorities to be ruled by the majority: posters illustrate this discourse dramatically.

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<sup>6</sup> The adage of "divide and impera" (divide and rule) in colonialist context has been developed by Indian scholars among others. Partha Chatterjee talks about "colonial difference" rule, the fact that colonialism is fundamentally based upon stressing absolute difference between colonizers and colonized, often in terms of "race." See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Princeton University Press, 1993. Referring to Chatterjee's work, Nicholas B. Dirks argues that by highlighting divisions of the Indian population itself into casts, the British imposed their superiority representing themselves as "united".

<sup>7</sup> On the relationship between colonizer and colonized, see Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Beacon Press, 1971; or see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, 1971.



Plate 2 : 阿姨又送糌粑来了

*Auntie ("Ayi") Has Even Come to Bring Tsampa*, author unknown, 1970.

In propaganda posters, the Han is constantly represented as the unmarked category. Whereas each minority is recognizable from its colourful and typical clothing or attire, the Han is identifiable through its non-marked characteristics. In this picture, we can easily distinguish the Tibetan woman on the right side from her multi-coloured apron and her hairdo. The child, as we learn from the word "tsampa" in the title, is a Tibetan child cared for by a Han nurse (right in the centre of the poster and therefore the most salient element in the composition). We can surmise from the red cross on the bed top sheet that this Tibetan child is sick.

Creating its own weak, backward, even sick, minority Other, the official discourse imposes the Han model as the dominant one.<sup>8</sup> The Han nurse here brings values like science (here, medicine and knowledge), modernity (western attire) and benevolence (the nurse brings both care and food- here a "tsampa", a traditional Tibetan drink), while the minority is desperately incompetent or in need. The central position of the Han nurse in the picture, between the child and his mother, marks the essential role the

<sup>8</sup> See an interesting and relevant paper on representations of Mexicans in Los Angeles by public health officials: Natalia Molina, *Constructing Race Through Visual Culture: Medicalized Representations of Mexican Communities in Early Twentieth Century Los Angeles*, 2003.  
[http://latino.si.edu/researchandmuseums/presentations/molina\\_paper.html](http://latino.si.edu/researchandmuseums/presentations/molina_paper.html) (checked on October 2006)



Han can play inside the minority. Moreover, the Han nurse has both the ability to care for and to feed the child like his own mother, who seems here incapable of so doing.<sup>9</sup>

Benevolence is another characteristic of the Han: the nurse here cares very much about the Tibetan customs, offering the little child tsampa, a Tibetan milk-based drink, while we know from the text on the nurse attire that the scene is located in Shanghai: What do Tibetans do in Shanghai, so far away from Tibet? Where does this tsampa come from then? In addition, we can say from the umbrella the Han nurse brings, that she came even though the rain or the wind: Han are not afraid of braving the danger to protect the minorities. Meanwhile, the child is excessively grateful to the Han nurse, as we can see from his smiling face and his raised arm.

This picture gives us a lot of information about the Han, though unmarked. As a matter of fact, we can understand from the analysis of propaganda period, that the ethnic “di-vision” is a process to establish and impose the young PRC rules through the Han majority.

### **New Social Order: Civilizing Project**

Han ethnicity is also representative of the government policy. The Han hegemony, as government policy representative, is justified by two main arguments: civilization and modernisation. They are dramatically visible on this poster below.

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the Chinese word “Ayi” can be used to call a woman around the same age or older than your own mother ( “Auntie” but not necessarily from your family), and to call a woman who looks after children (“nanny”).



Plate 3 : 学习好经验, 建设新山区

*Learn From Good Experience and Develop the New Mountain Area,*  
Shan Xihe, 1974.

Representing the minorities as incapable and backward implies a stable and sovereign Han. As a result, the Han make it a rule to “civilize” minorities. This poster features a Han “big brother” transferring his technological knowledge (technology here represented by tractors) to the Yi “sisters” and “brothers”. Again in the central position of the picture, the Han is explaining something to Yi women and men dressed in ethnic clothes. The Yi are literally learning from the Han experience, like this woman holding a notebook, ready to take down the Han youth’s every word. We can note as well that the minority Yi is represented in traditional clothing and attire: they represent the past, the old China, what China is not supposed to be anymore. The Han is the only one here that wears modern clothing. Modernisation of China is in Han hands, that is to say in the CCP hands. Modernisation is often presented as the condition for an economic development. Civilizing mission and economic modernisation are two arguments used in colonial times to justify colonization. This is disturbing that they are used to justify the Han hegemony as well...

The function of each member of the PRC is clearly defined through ethnic classification: the social organisation becomes undeniable and assigns people specific set-role. Here colonialist theory seems to be an useful framework thinking about

minority representation in China. In what Partha Chatterjee called the “colonial rule of difference”, the paradox is: the Han entice minorities with promises of modernity (or freedom in some cases), yet the promise can not be kept since minorities are represented essentially as limited by their own “inaptitude”.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it is in Han interest to perpetuate this representation of the minorities’ inaptitude, so as to maintain their own leading role.

Once the supremacy of the Han and the CCP rule has been established and legitimated by the inferiority of minorities, the new social order it imposes has to be justified and promoted as well.



Plate 4:

*Chairman Mao Trusted Chairman Hua Completely; The People and Army  
Warmly Endorse Him Too, Liu Renqing, 1976, Beijing*

It is necessary for the CCP to assert that a multiethnic state is some unchanged surviving reality from a multi-millennial China. Thus, “ethnicity” (*minzu*) becomes the reference capable of articulating and organizing China’s diverse form of social identity, as well as social class.

Here, posters of Presidents Mao and Hua are held aloft together by a peasant, a worker, a soldier and an intellectual, all representatives of social classes, plus several ethnic representatives: ethnicity is used to mark people. This division of the population seeks to be historically natural, as Chinese society had always been divided into a

<sup>10</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*.

leading majority Han and a multitude of to-be-guided minorities. The minorities here are expressly represented as “back-ward” and in the background.

The support of the whole population (every class *and* every ethnicity) is a *sine qua non* in the justification of the leaders’ sovereignty. The two minorities represented just behind the class representatives and in front of the other minorities are a Tibetan woman and a Uygur woman: this has indeed to be connected with the fact that the Tibetans and the Uygurs are precisely the two minorities whose inclusions into Chinese modern nation-state have posed (and still pose) vast problems.

Under these circumstances, the ethnic division system that now defines Chinese social order has to seem “natural” and to be an integral part of Chinese history. Multiethnic thus becomes an essential feature to define and describe China.

### **New National Identity: Territorial and Temporal Identity**

It is remarkable that representations of minorities often attempt to emphasize China’s territorial identity. The most represented minority is most certainly the Tibetan minority for the reasons we mentioned above.



Plate 5: *Chairman Hua Comes to Our Tibetan Family*,  
Liu Zhisen, 1978

On this poster, Chairman Hua sits with Tibetans who are listening carefully to Hua’s every word. Beside them is a peach tree full of peaches: as Li Yu noticed rightly in her work on minorities’ representation, you cannot find peach trees on the Tibetan

Plateau.<sup>11</sup> How did this tree arrive in Tibet? Would Hua have offered them peach trees? Does the scene take place in Tibet? If not, where does the scene take place and what would Tibetans do out of Tibet?<sup>12</sup>

If we bring up the poster number two again (sick Tibetan child cared by a Han nurse), we can notice the same process. If we look very carefully in minute detail, a disconcerting element is the words sewed on the white sheet: “上海市儿童医院”: *Shanghai shi ertong yiyuan*: Shanghai Children's Hospital. This suggests that the scene takes place in Shanghai: what would a Tibetan child and mother do in Shanghai, so far away for their hometown? One possibility is that they travelled to Shanghai; or that they are actually in Tibet but the sheet comes from Shanghai hospital.

According to me, whatever the answer is, this confusion is not insignificant: it attempts to justify the China government's hegemony on Tibet. This lack of realism or clear and concrete information is really significant: it attempts to muddle the spectator and to blur the inner frontiers of China by “deterritorializing” the characters. It seeks visibly to strengthen China's territoriality identity.

On the other hand, it appears very clearly that representations of minorities attempt to widen the temporal boundaries of China. We can state this from the recurrent symbols of “purity” and “authenticity” that appear in many posters representing Chinese minorities.

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<sup>11</sup> Li Yu, *Representations of Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Propaganda Posters, 1957-1983*. Sent by the author, and available now at: <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/minzu/> (posted in April 2006)

<sup>12</sup> Someone in Singapore suggested this may not be peach but apples, which can be found profusely on the Tibetan Plateau. I am grateful for his remark, but I maintain that those fruits look like peaches: peaches are very often represented on Chinese illustrations such as *nianhua* (New Year Pictures), paintings or posters. They represent prosperity, affluence and longevity. Even if they really are apples, they look strangely like peaches, which cannot be a coincidence: these posters were designed by Han for Han spectators.



Plate 6: 农奴女儿上大学, *Serf's Daughter goes to University*, Pan Xinshun, 1973



Plate 7: Title and author unknown, 1978

To be analysed with the first poster (children in the grass with a radio), these two pictures- among many others- illustrate what we have suggested before. In each of these posters, different symbols of innocence can be noted: figures are mostly children; little white lambs appear too. The presence of children has obviously something to do with an infantilization (and feminization) of the minority, and the lambs may emphasize their naivety.<sup>13</sup> But it refers an original “purity” as well. If we consider the décor in which the figures are represented, we can note: desert landscapes with mountains and infinite greenery; non spoiled landscapes with no machines, no plants, and no marks of alteration by men. Everything is represented as if minorities live in a different China, from different times. Even their clothes are out of time: traditional clothes cannot tell us

<sup>13</sup> An abundant literature on feminization of the Chinese minorities can be found. See for instance Louisa Schein's articles on feminization of ethnicity such as "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China." in *Modern China* 23(1), 1997; and her book: *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. See also Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities" in *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 53, No. 1: 92-123, 1994. Less has been written on infantilization of ethnicity.



about the precise time (it could be four hundreds year ago as well as yesterday). However, as being a part of China, representing minorities in such decors is also a way to represent China as an unchanging entity.

Despite modernization and industrialisation, China keeps being “authentic” and become rooted as a-temporal. It would be impossible to represent only Han people in such landscape without questioning their superiority in technology for instance. The Han is a definitively supposed to be a city dweller. By representing minorities in countryside, China’s temporal boundaries can be pushed back; its history is rooted deeper and deeper.

### New China: Harmony and Unity



Plate 8 : 团结起来, 争取更大的胜利

*Stand United to Gain a Larger Victory*, author unknown, 1975.

This poster celebrates “*tuanjie*” (unity and unification) among the China’s peoples. Minorities stand behind a worker, a peasant and a soldier. This concept of *tuanjie* involves the idea that all the differences, which are indeed foregrounded and promoted, have to be complementary but never conflicting. The title of the poster (*minzu tuanjie, zhengqu gengda de shengli*) translated into various minority languages (Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchu or Korean) is a slogan promoting national consensus, inclusive of all nationalities. The slogan translated into several languages and pictorially represented within the poster, seeks to indicate a simultaneous respect for

linguistic differences- different yet united. But the book everyone holds here is the same one: visibly it is a selection of Mao Zedong thoughts. And it looks written in Chinese characters... We can find here the limits the CCP intentionally sets in the question of multiculturalism and alterity.



Plate 9: 祖国歌 *Song for our Motherland*, author unknown, 1982

This poster particularly interesting because it emphasizes the diversity of peoples in China, living under the CCP rules. Minorities are here represented in a harmonious concert, playing music and dancing. Although their differences (symbolised by different clothing and musical instruments), they all live in harmony, in a great symphony.

However, it gives China an opportunity to set a new universality: calling itself a multiethnic state, representing its diversity through multiple minorities' cultures, languages, and clothes, China claims to be a melting pot, concentrating various aspects of human cultural practices.<sup>14</sup> From then on, China accedes to a new universal status, the one it lost while constructing a modern nation-state. The world is not concentrated around a Chinese unlimited empire, and China is not a magnetic centre to the barbarians anymore; but still, the modern Chinese nation-state remains a universalistic

<sup>14</sup> A French scholar, Anne-Marie Thiesse, assumes that the Third French Republic emphasized the local to assert the national : picturing a large range of landscapes and ethnicities, France tried to find the universalizing and gathering power it has lost in the defeat against the Prussians in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

See Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Ils apprenaient la France : l'exaltation des régions dans le discours patriotique*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1997.



model: minorities represent its diversity, and the Han majority is defined as the core of this universe.

## Conclusion

The representation of minorities as a collective group is clearly a political move toward a definition of a new Chinese national identity. Creating its Other, the Han identity (and the national identity) is established and justified at the same time. Classification into ethnicities involves the securing of a dominant majority. The new social order thus establishes who the dominant are and who the dominated are, and this organization, claiming to be universal, can never be questioned.

Of course these comments on representation of minorities are not limited to propaganda posters: we could draw the same conclusion from an analysis of other visual forms such as films, video clips, performances... Posters are a part of a much larger visual culture.

Similarly, the instrumentalisation of (ethnic) minorities for political ends is not confined to China: France, UK, America and other countries have all used this kind of process to assert their imperial authority (and in some ways still do so in a contemporary postcolonial context).

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